T/SOR/22/7/18

"How to cool the Military."

VIETNAM

by BOB POTTER.

There is a crying need for a dispassionate analysis of the situation in Vietnam and of its origins. 'Teach-ins' about Vietnam will be resumed ... although the Labour Government will not allow representatives of the Vietcong to come to Britain to put their side of the case. Demonstrations against the Labour Government's policy must continue and gain momentum. Their little exercise in meretricious arse-licking ('America supports the pound and Britain supports America in Vietnam' - Dean Rusk) must be exposed. (Those who still believe in the Labour Party should now at least insist that their leaders obtain the rate for the job!). Above all, informed opinion is needed. The following pages provide some essential background material, detrimental to all parties concerned.

It is impossible to understand the situation in Vietnam today without seeing it in the context of the world situation - a world where the giant economic powers, the USA on the one hand, the USSR and China on the other hand, are struggling for supremacy.

The two power blocs have met face to face in Vietnam, and the thousands of Vietnamese who are being killed and mutilated daily are the unconscious pawns in this world-wide struggle.

More than 95% of Vietnam's population are peasants. As far as they are concerned they are engaged in a peasant war. The greatest differentiations in land ownership exist, and always have existed, in the South and it is here that the struggle is sharpest.

A glance at the map published in 'Time' on 6.8.65 will show that the vast majority of the peasants support the Vietcong which they see as representing freedom from foreign domination, and the ending of the feudal system still prevalent in the south of the country. It suits Chinese foreign policy to support the movement for liberation at this stage, and American foreign policy to oppose the same movement at this stage. This determines the situation more than the actions of the Vietnamese.

The American aggression in Vietnam has already created a world-wide movement of opposition. We support this movement wholeheartedly. But our support is not based on any starry-eyed illusions about the Vietcong. We recognize that the Vietcong has the mass support of the peasantry, but we also recognize that it is a 'Popular Front' controlled by the Communists, whose objective is to set up a bureaucratic state in South Vietnam like that existing in the North. We also recognize that the Vietcong has some pretty murky political ancestors and that its hands are bespattered with working class blood.

It is not the first time in the history of communism that bureaucracies have been founded on the sacrifices of millions of dedicated revolutionaries. The ruling circles in Moscow, Peking and Hanoi are using the genuine hatred of the peasants for the foreign invader and their genuine hunger for land as cynically today as they ever have in the past. (1)

FRENCH COLONY

Indochina became a French colony in the 1870's. It was never a particularly efficient or profitable colony - indeed in the 1890's French legislators frequently complained that France spent 80 million Francs in order to earn 95 million each year.(2) The colossal expenditure went to maintain the enormous civil service bureaucracy, equal numerically to the British administration in India. (Population of Indochina 30 million; India, 325 million).

Industrial production was negligible. 96.5% of all exports consisted of raw materials. Raw latex was hardly worked on but exported as such, at very low cost, by the Michelin Rubber Trust. Although Indochina's soil was rich in coal and various metals there was only one smelting furnace in the whole country. Two-thirds of the coal was exported. Even rice was exported. French imperialism saw in the non-industrialisation of its colonies a guarantee of stability. It sought by all possible means to prevent the development of a numerous, concentrated and educated working class.

The pattern of land ownership was also very backward. Some 700 European settlers owned 20% of the cultivable land, of which only half was worked upon. The vast mass of poor peasants owned less than 5 acres and in the North often less than 1 acre. Irrigation was very primitive. Indochinese rice fields produced less than half the yield per acre being obtained in Japan. Even phosphate fertilisers were being exported. (3)

Prior to the Second World War the Popular Front Government of Leon Blum introduced 8 hour day legislation in 1937 (4), and although trade unions were banned by the same government, French employers were forced to recognize and negotiate with the powerful workers' representatives.

THE VANGUARDS ARRIVE

The Indochina Communist Party was founded in 1929. At first its activities were essentially peasant activities, in spite of its 'proletarian' jargon. In the towns the ICP worked in close alliance with the influential Trotskyist Party, (5) and in 1933 the two parties presented a joint slate of candidates for the Colonial Council elections. Candidates of both parties were elected, demonstrating the intelligent recognition by the French authorities of the non-revolutionary character of both parties. (6)

The early 30's were years of numerous mutinies, peasant demonstrations and industrial strikes. Together the ICP and the Trotskyists enrolled thousands of supporters, until August 1935 saw the Seventh Congress of the Comintern, and a switch in the Moscow line.

Collaboration with the Western 'Democracies' and the 'progressive capitalists' against the rising power of fascism was the order of the day, and, obediently, the ICP Central Committee dropped the slogan 'Down with French Imperialism' from its programme. The campaign against Indochina's feudal rulers, and even the demand for national independence were dropped. At the same time an intensified struggle against 'Trotskyism' was launched. Ho Chi Minh could proudly report to the Comintern in July 1939 'As regards the Trostkyists - no alliances and no concessions. They must be unmasked as the stooges of the fascists, which they are'.

The Popular Front days came to an end when France, in September 1939, banned the CP at home and abroad. The CP honeymoon with the French colonialists thereby came to an end. In a statement issued on November 13, 1939 the ICP tried to reconcile the irreconcilable by attacking France's 'imperialist' war against Nazi Germany, but at the same time asking its supporters to struggle against Japan (which at that time threatened Russian positions in the Far East):

> 'Our Party finds it to be a matter of life and death... to struggle against the imperialist war and policy of thievery and massacre of French imperialism.. while at the same time struggling against the aggressive aims of Japanese fascism.'

AMERICA SHOWS AN INTEREST

It is not commonly known that America's rulers had already decided, in 1940, that following World War II French influence was to be ended in Indochina, and replaced by American influence. At Teheran and Yalta Roosevelt proposed that France's rule in Indochina should be replaced by some sort of international trusteeship. Stalin agreed with the suggestion, which was vetoed by Churchill.

The first effects of this policy appeared in June 1940, when the French governor, Admiral Decoux, urgently attempted to acquire aircraft and equipment from the USA for use against the impending Japanese attack. The equipment had already been paid for, but Washington stepped in and refused delivery. Decoux was virtually forced to accept Japanese demands for 'facilities' in the Bay of Tongking.

The U.S. interest in Indochina partly explains Pearl Harbour. In July 1941 the Japanese occupied air bases in South Vietnam. The Americans replied with an embargo on petroleum shipped to Japan, and a freezing of all Japanese assets in the USA. At the eleventh hour, only a few days before Pearl Harbour, Roosevelt offered Japan a non-aggression guarantee in exchange for a Japanese evacuation of Indochina.

The Nazi defeat in France in 1944 and 1945 inspired French troops in Indochina (who throughout the war had been 'recognized as the legal authority' by the Japanese Government) to drive the Japanese from the colony. The Japanese struck back, and in March 1945 launched a full-scale offensive against the French garrisons. The American Air Force was operating in the area, and urgent appeals were sent to it for help - appeals pointedly ignored by the American command. The reason is best told in the words of U.S. General Chennault, commander of the 14th U.S. Air Force:

> '... orders arrived from theatre headquarters stating that no arms and ammunition would be provided to French troops under any circumstances. I was allowed to proceed with "normal" action against the Japanese in Indochina provided it did not involve supplying **French troops**... General Wedemeyer's orders not to aid the French came directly from the War Department. Apparently it was American policy then that French Indochina would not be returned to the French. The American government was interested in seeing the French forcibly ejected from Indochina so the problem of post-war separation from their colony would be easier... While American transports in China avoided Indochina, the British flew aerial supply missions for the French all the way from Calcutta, dropping tommy guns, grenades and mortars'. (7)

British planes had flown 1500 miles in attempts to assist, while U.S. planes, 150 miles distant, were forced officially to ignore their plight. The French garrisons were annihilated. On March 10, 1945 the Japanese declared Indochina 'independent' and installed Bao-Dai as Emperor. (8)

THE CONQUEST OF POWER

With the outbreak of war the leadership of the ICP had left Indochina for the safety of the neighbouring Chinese provinces. They went along with the new 'National Unity' line, (9) especially as the South China warlords were prepared to back Ho-Chi-Minh and his well disciplined communists. The Chinese had ambitions in the mineral-rich Tongking area, and felt they could use Ho to achieve their ends.

Ho had other ideas though. The official 'Party History' declares:

> 'The ICP advocated an extremely clear policy: to lead the masses in insurrection in order to disarm the Japanese before the arrival of the Allied forces in Indochina; to wrest power from the Japanese and their puppet stooges, and finally, as the people's power, to welcome the Allied forces'.

In August 1945, Ho entered Hanoi and without a shot being fired the city was his. 152,000 Chinese troops moved into the Northern areas of Vietnam, and Ho set about organizing elections, to be held in January 1946. He promised the Kuomintang generals that the Vietnamese non-communist parties would be fiven 70 seats in the first legislature provided that they did not compete

in the elections. Not surprisingly the Vietminh single list of candidates was overwhelmingly elected! 90% of the population went to the polls, 80% of them voting for the 'Fatherland Front'.

Parallel with the Chinese occupation of the North, American and British troops arrived in the South. The country was in a state of chaos, and in these first months the Vietminh's organized assassinations reached their peak: opposition party leaders, religious sects and Trotskyists were systematically murdered.

American policy at this stage was to support the Vietminh. Like the Chinese warlords they believed they could use Ho as a stick with which to beat the French. The Frenchman Paul Mus tells in his book 'Vietnam - Sociologie d'une guerre' of the visit of an American officer to a Vietminh prison camp. When a young French officer cried out to the American to liberate them, the American replied: 'Those fellows must have some reason for putting you in there. So why don't you stay where you are?'. The name of the French officer was Jean Ramadier.

THE FRENCH TEMPORISE, THEN COUNTER-ATTACK

The Vietminh, at this stage, was a good Stalinist organization. Stalin believed in implementing the Yalta and Teheran agreements and the Vietminh therefore advocated nothing more radical than 'independence within the framework of the French Union'. This explains the Vietminh's readiness to sign with France the disastrous agreement of March 6, 1946.

It also explains, on the internal front, the liquidation by the Vietminh of the self governing organs of popular control and administration that had been thrown up in the course of struggle against the Japanese and the systematic assassination of revolutionary militants, including the legendary figure of the Trotskyist leader Ta Tu Thau, a few weeks before the signing of the rotten compromise with the French. (10) It explains the dissolution of the Communist Party into the Vietminh and the Vietminh's nomination of the traitor Bao Dai as a 'councillor of the Republic' and their

Two years later his father was Premier of France.

When the official surrender of the Japanese forces in Tongking took place, on September 27, 1945, no French flag was flown (although Soviet and Vietminh flags were) and the only French general present was offered seat no. 115 at the ceremony, behind the Vietminh leaders and a bevy of Chinese junior officers.

French re-inforcements were ferried into South Vietnam by the British Labour Government in October 1945. The French renounced all rights in China as the price of the Chinese withdrawal from Indochina, and in an agreement signed on March 6, 1946 France recognized 'the Republic of Vietnam as a Free State having its own government, parliament, army and treasury, and belonging to the Indochinese Federation and the French Union'. 15,000 French troops were to be stationed north of the 16th parallel, to be relieved progressively, within 5 years, by Vietnamese troops.

description of him as 'a symbol of our will to remain within the framework of the French Union'.

On the external front it explains Ho-Chi-Minh's repeated efforts to compromise with France, efforts which were only to provide a breathing space for the French Army to build up its strength.

This is the real significance of the agreement of March 6, 1946. General Leclerc's forces were in a blind alley. With the help of British troops (the Labour Government again!) they had captured Saigon on September 23, 1945 but hadn't the strength to cope with the Vietnamese partisans in Cochinchina or in the Northern provinces where Chiang Kai Chek's troops were still stationed. Unable to win militarily French imperialism sought to win through 'diplomacy'. In exchange for vague promises of a 'free state... belonging to the French Union' Ho Chi Minh allowed the French Expeditionary Corps to occupy the main towns and the key highways of the country. He called on the population to welcome the French back. Ho Chi Minh then went to France, to the Fontainebleau Conference, which the French succeeded in dragging out from early March to late September, when they signed a 'modus vivendi' with Ho Chi Minh. They of course used these precious months to reinforce their expeditionary corps and to set up, at Dalat, their first puppet government, that of Dr. Thin. (11)

By November 20, 1946 the Expeditionary Corps felt strong enough to resume hostilities. On November 24 the French Navy captured Haiphong after a bombardment that killed over 6,000 civilians. The French were now ready to reconquer their former colony. All Ho Chi Minh's efforts had been in vain.

The French recognition of Indochinese 'sovereignty' had been purely tactical, and in fact French forces had been steadily built up for colonial reconquest. In France the Communist Party could have taken power, which explains why the USSR never openly supported Vietminh ambitions for independence. Indeed the French Communist Party cell in Saigon warned the Vietminh then trying to resist the French occupation of Saigon (September 1945) that 'any premature adventures' towards independence might 'not be in line with Soviet perspectives. (See Harold Isaacs 'No Peace in Asia', p. 173). This explains why the French Communist leaders in Parliament (Maurice Thorez was Vice-Premier at the time) did nothing to oppose the war credits or any of the emergency measures connected with the first phase of the war. (12)

No wonder then that French right-wing politicians rose in the National Assembly during the Appropriations Debate of March 14 to 18, 1947 to thank their own Communist colleagues and the Soviet Union for leaving France to fight its war in Indochina without outside disturbance. In the same debate French Premier Ramadier emphasized 'in the Indochina question, we have always noted to this day the correct attitude of the Soviet Government'.

Between November 1946 and the summer of 1954 the French colonialists fought a protracted war against the Vietminh forces eventually suffering complete defeat at Dien Bien Phu, on May 8, 1954. (13) Two months later the war was over. France had lost 172,000 casualties, and had ended forever her hold on Vietnam. In April 1956 French forces left the country.

During these years a change in American policy had taken place. Mao Tse Tung had recognized the Ho Chi Minh regime on January 20, 1950. Eleven days later the USSR had followed suit. (14) The USA then gradually began to change its attitude to the puppet Bao Dai and to the French military operation. The 'New York Herald Tribune' expressed all the doubts and misgivings in the minds of America's rulers: 'We are in a difficult position. Bao Dai's regime cannot be considered truly independent as long as French troops remain in Vietnam... But if French troops were to leave Indochina the whole country would be overrun by Ho Chi Minh's forces'.

The erstwhile 'allies' (France and the USA), for a while estranged, were obliged to overcome their mutual suspicions in the interest of higher things. A new front opened up in the Cold War between the ruling classes of East and West.

THE GENEVA AGREEMENTS

The Geneva Conference which followed the French defeat provided for a provisional military line at the 17th parallel. It prohibited the introduction into Vietnam of war material or of 'any troop reinforcements and additional military personel. It prohibited the establishment of 'new military bases' and emphasized strict non-adherence to 'any military alliance'. It further provided for general elections to be held in July 1956 at the latest, under the supervision of an International Commission comprised of delegates from Poland, India and Canada.

In effect the Agreements paved the way for the consolidation of two bureaucratic states. The two Vietnams are theoretically complementary. In the North: rich mineral deposits, and some industrialization (although 80% of the population are peasants). In the South: agriculture. Both sides rely on outside aid.

BUREAUCRACY IN THE NORTH

The Northern regime inherited an area twice ravaged in less than a decade, plundered by Japanese and Chinese, bombed by the U.S. Air Force, ploughed under by French tanks. In addition the sudden exodus of 860,000 refugees (15) to the South created a serious crisis of food production. Only a Russian 'crash' programme of Burmese rice staved off a serious famine.

Immediate state plans were drafted in all fields of food and industrial production. Invariably, these first draftings proved to be over-ambitious, but in general North Vietnamese achievements were considerable.

One of the most difficult problems of the consolidation period (1955-1958) was that of land reform. The first measures had actually been drafted in 1953 (and applied where possible). They contained sets of rules for determining 'social class' which were quite comical - for example, a piglet was equated to so many quarts of rice, etc. By the use of dogmatic formulae the whole population was sub-divided into five categories ranging from 'landlord' to 'agricultural worker'. (Similar classifications were devised to categorize town dwellers). Added to these classifications were rules whereby daughters of landowners who married into a 'low' class must first have spent one year in the new class before being considered part of it, but a poor farmer's daughter who 'married up' could remain married for three years before being reclassified into the new (less desirable) social category.

THE PEASANTS REVOLT

On November 2, 1956, at exactly the same time as Soviet tanks were rumbling through the streets of Budapest, the Ho Chi Minh Government faced its most important uprising of dissatisfied peasants.

By coincidence Canadian members of the International Control Commission were in Vietnam when the outbreak took place. Within a matter of hours the uprising had spread to neighbouring villages. Troops sent to restore order were driven from the village. Hanoi acted as any colonial power would have done. They sent their 325th Division to crush the rebels. Close to 6,000 farmers were deported or executed.

Ho reacted to the rebellion with eminently practical measures. The land reform tribunals were abolished, as of November 8, 1956. The Minister of Agriculture was sacked. The problems of Northern land reform were largely problems created by political dogma like those quoted above, for, as contrasted to the South, 98.2% of all land in the North comprised properties of 5 hectares (12 acres) or less, and the land was owned by those who tilled it. The exodus of 860,000 richer peasants to the South also provided plenty of surplus land to be parcelled out to the landless peasants that remained.

MONEY FOR THE BOYS

I have already pointed out that both North and South Vietnam are dependent on outside aid. According to official Hanoi statistics, communist bloc grants and loans between 1955 and 1961 totalled more than $ 1 billion, of which the USSR provided $ 365 million and China $ 662 million. This works out at over $70 per person, which is roughly what the Saigon regime received from the United States in the same period.

How much of this aid actually reached the people is, of course, a matter for conjecture. Bureaucrats are the same the whole world over. For instance late in 1955 the official Party organ 'Nhan-Dan' admitted that the National Trade Service of Ho Chi Minh's native province had embezzled 700 million piastres ($ 1 million), a drug making factory had embezzled 37 million piastres, and the Public Works division of Nam-Dinh had diverted 16 million piastres, originally allocated to the building of houses to its own officials, etc. A subsequent investigation revealed that 20.4 million piastres had been misappropriated, another 578 million 'wasted' along with 35,000 labour days and 444 tons of rice.

BUREAUCRACY IN THE SOUTH

As the French moved out of South Vietnam, the Americans moved in. They quickly installed their own puppet Premier, the unsavoury Diem whom even a laudatory 'Time' profile of April 4, 1955 described as capable of 'exploding into tantrums if interupted' and who will, if a personal enemy is mentioned 'spit across the room and snarl "Dirty type".' Diem had spent the war years under the protection of the Japanese military authorities. He had spent the post-war years travelling about the United States winning support for his fanatically anti-communist pro-Catholic ideas. He was particularly favoured by John F. Kennedy and Francis Cardinal Spellman, the voices of Catholic America.

Diem quite openly assumed dictatorial powers. A year after his accession he 'organized' a referendum to have Bao Dai ousted in favour of a republic. Not to be outdone by Ho's electoral returns, Diem managed to secure a 98.2% vote in favour of the republic.

The widespread corruption of the Diem regime, the absurd 'morality laws' which forbade dancing and the singing of sentimental songs, the widespread persecution of all non-catholic elements are common knowledge. They are openly admitted by the Americans, and I don't intend to elaborate on them here.

The predominant issue in South Vietnam is the land-starvation of the peasants. In spite of three so-called land reform acts (Agrarian Laws), the situation remains as follows. Out of a total of 250,000 land owners, 6,300 (most of them absentee landlords) own 1,035,000 hectares of rice land, (45% of the total) while 183,000 small holders own 345,000 hectares (15% of the total). In other words less than 3% of the landowners own 45% of the land. (16)

Total food production in South Vietnam, before the recent intensification of the war, was only ⅔ of the 1938 total.

AMERICAN COLONY

Dictators of South Vietnam have changed constantly in recent years, but the colonial economic status of the country remains unchanged. The U.S. rulers more and more openly admit that it is 'their' war, and that they intend staying in Vietnam even if the impossible should happen, and they should be asked to leave by one of their puppet Saigon governments. (17)

Prior to 1954, while the battles were being fought in the Northern provinces, the Saigon governments were dominated by Southern landowners and representatives of the old feudal nobility. Since 1955, ironically enough, they have been dominated by Central Vietnamese and Northern Catholics... at a time when the burden of the struggle has been in the South!

The only consistent feature of the various Saigon governments has been the hatred they have managed to inspire in the masses of the Vietnamese people - a fact tacitly admitted by Eisenhower in his memoirs:

> 'I have never talked or corresponded with a person knowledgeable in Indo-Chinese affairs who did not agree that had elections been held as of the time of the fighting, possibly 80% of the population would have voted for the communist Ho Chi Minh'. ('Mandate for Change: The White House Years 1953-1956', p. 372.

No wonder the Americans weren't prepared to allow the 1956 elections agreed by the Geneva Conference! After all, what price 'democracy' when the other chap looks like winning?

HOBSONS CHOICE

To choose sides in Vietnam is to place oneself in the tutelage of one or another bureaucratic system. As things stand at the moment the Vietnamese peasant who revolts against his feudal and foreign masters has no alternative but to support the Vietcong, which is controlled by the CP and Hanoi. He identifies his struggle with that of a party seeking power - instead of freeing himself he supports another class - the bureaucracy.

Those of us fortunate enough not to be directly involved in the war have no alternative but to support and participate in every demonstration and action against the U.S. aggression. It is our duty to ensure that ALL the facts are given to the working class, and encouragement and help given for revolutionary action.

The only way we can really assist the Vietnamese workers and peasants is by overthrowing our own ruling class and the capitalist system, for the Vietnamese are primarily the pawns in the struggle between rival imperialisms.

My conclusion does not have the quality of originality. It will not be as easy to implement as, say, a collection for 'medical aid to North Vietnam'. I apologize for not being able to offer a glibber or quicker solution to the Vietnam problem. There is only one solution -

WORLD REVOLUTION.